

Helping farmers to cope with challenges

THE effects of climate change on the agricultural sector have long-term effects on food security and the wellbeing of the world population.

Adding to the concerns is the Covid-19 pandemic that has severely affected all sectors of the economy including agriculture.

It is logical to think that demand for food is not likely to decrease and agricultural food producers are not, under any circumstances, facing difficulties in selling their produce.

However, farmers are hugely affected by the pandemic. It was reported that 2,300 farmers experienced losses of RM1 million per day due to several hundred tonnes of harvested produce not sold and discarded.

This occurred in the main areas of vegetable production in Cameron Highlands and Lojing.

As to why their produce was not sold and had to be discarded, the issue can be discussed from various angles including the marketers, processors and consumers but let's look from the farmers' perspective on the eight challenges they face.



Farmers have been hugely affected by the pandemic.

1. Preparedness. As farmers, they are prepared for normal risks such as rain and drought as well as those related to financial issues and labour force.

But they were ill-prepared for the impact of Covid-19 and the Movement Control Order (MCO).

2. Choosing between "to throw" or "to give". Crop plants need to be harvested when the time comes. Labour is required in harvesting, loading, grading and packaging.

Subsequently, the produce need to be brought to collection centres before they are sent to wholesale markets, which incur costs. Management of the produce thus requires co-ordination and high costs.

3. Perishables. Crops are perishable after harvest. Due to the MCO, the appropriate harvesting procedures could not be undertaken. The product had to be discarded.

4. Storage and transport technol-

ogy. Most farmers do not have the facility or technology to store farm produce and means of transport.

5. Farm location. Farms can be found in areas close to main roads but some are located in distant remote and hilly places. Transportation of farm produce can be costly and slow.

6. Limited wholesale market activities. All activities at wholesale markets have been limited during the MCO. There are not many businesses that are open, resulting in farmers having limited opportunities to market their farm produce. The quantity of produce bought by wholesalers was also reduced. Unsold produce arriving at wholesale markets cannot be sent back to the farms and are usually discarded.

7. Insect pests and plant diseases. Crops need to be harvested and cannot be left in the field as they harbour insect pests. When left in the field, they become hosts for insect pests and the effects last for a long duration.

8. Production costs. In crop production, various input costs need to be addressed such as costs for fertilisers, irrigation, utilities, pesticides, labour and transportation. When farm produce cannot be marketed, farmers' incomes are affected, subsequently affecting available capital for the next crop cycle.

Farmers are in an unfortunate situ-

ation. That is why government agencies need to quickly assist farmers. Without any initiatives, the issue of food supply at this critical time could be difficult to overcome or become stunted.

The Department of Agriculture, Federal Agricultural Marketing Authority, Farmers' Organisation Authority and food manufacturers need to assist them now or immediately after the MCO ends.

Coordination in marketing of farm produce, emergency relief funds for crop damage and other assistance need to be addressed.

We need to figure out how farm produce, either harvested or will be harvested in times of crisis, are marketed and generate income to farmers.

Long-term adaptation in facing the effect of a pandemic on agriculture such as improvement in technology and production facility and marketing of farm produce; enhancing the cooperation network among farmers and wholesalers, and among wholesalers and food manufacturers; special allocations in times of crisis; and an increase in sensitivity of initial risk preparation need to be planned.

BY DR NORSIDA MAN

Department of Agriculture Technology
Faculty of Agriculture, Universiti Putra
Malaysia (UPM)